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ABSTRACT

Advanced composition is difficult to define because of the complexities implied by each of the two terms, "advanced" and "composition." The word "advanced" is loaded with positive connotations that generally suggest progress. However, the progress expected of a class of students at one institution may not agree with the progress expected at another, suggesting that "standards" vary from instructor to instructor. Perhaps one approach to the problem of "standards" is to distinguish between local and transferable writing skills. Local skills, such as editing skills that the advanced composition students would have already learned, can be taught directly. Transferable skills are acquired rather than learned and include syntactic fluency, control of diction, sense of audience, organizational ability, and persuasiveness. Advanced composition students must already have acquired a relatively high degree of ability with all the transferable skills. Distinguishing between product (writing) and process (composition), advanced composition may be seen as different from advanced writing because composition relies on a self-critical, systematic, and disciplined study of the process by which advanced writing is produced. A more satisfying definition of advanced composition should concentrate on effective ways of teaching the local skills of writing and on workshop exercises that successfully integrate local and transferable skills. (HOD)

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TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF ADVANCED COMPOSITION

We can safely define advanced composition by identifying the university and college courses in which it is taught in a general description. Those courses are those beyond the freshman level, generally. Relative to the universal freshman composition course, these courses are "advanced." And the students who enroll in the advanced composition courses are generally required to have taken the freshman course, or to have demonstrated writing skill equivalent to that of a student who completes the freshman course. Such definition is all we can feel safe about; further definition will be more difficult because of complexities about precise definitions of each of the two terms, "advanced" and "composition." Let me turn to them at once.

The word "advanced" is loaded with positive connotations; I cannot discover a single pejorative meaning for the word. Generally, it suggests "progress," an idea of unquestionable value for Americans who like to think of their culture as "progressive," which means, I think, that the culture is developing constructively and positively towards goals we all share. So if you teach "advanced" composition, you are engaged, by the very word, in progress. Progress is, as you well know, a relative term, particularly when it is applied to the level of writing skills of a particular student or of a particular class in a certain college or university. Not only will the progress of students vary, often varying quite remarkably in the same class, but the progress expected of a class of students at one institution may not agree with the progress expected at another. To take a hypothetical case, the progress of a writing student at one college may be considered remarkably good, while at another

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college the work would be considered only average. I am referring to the well-known phenomena of "standards," which are probably going to vary from instructor to instructor and from school to school even if we begin to make efforts to define national standards for advanced composition.

Since I have raised the issue, let me pursue it for a moment. I do not see much hope or value for national standards, although I would dutifully participate in forming them if my colleagues in the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition, the CCCC, and the NCTE wanted to draw up some national standards. My reservation about such standards is that national standards for anything are always prescriptive and negative. The goal is always very positive, but the means, the standards, are always negative. Take, for example, the rules about language which say that it should be devoid of unsavory references to the sexual identity of human beings; in writing this paper for the CCCC, I was under certain negative prescriptions not to use words for the male sex as if these words were generic. I cannot use "him" to refer to "anyone," and if I come upon a temptation to break the rule, I usually exchange "him" for "them," often without going back to exchange "anyone" for "anybody." In the process, I am being taught that "them" is a third-person pronoun that is not declinded for number, i.e., "them" is both singular and plural.

Perhaps one approach to the issue of "standards" for "advanced" composition is to distinguish, as Ross Winterowd has done, between "local" and "transferable" writing skills. He argues that "local" skills can be learned, or to put it another way, such skills can be taught directly; these would be the editing skills which the advanced composition student would have already learned. Remediation in the mechanics, Winterowd says, have no place whatsoever in the advanced composition program. Then there are the "transferable" skills which are "acquired" rather than "learned" directly from instruction; they include

syntactic fluency, control of diction, sense of audience, organizational ability, persuasiveness. Advanced composition students, Winterowd says, must have already acquired a relatively high degree of ability with all the transferable skills. You can see immediately that we might be able to set a fairly clear-cut and observable standard for the "local" skill of editing; problems of punctuation, verb agreement, and spelling require remediation and thus disqualify the advanced composition student who needs them. Back they must go to the writing laboratory where such local skills are taught. But you can also see that setting a standard for "transferable" skills is very much more difficult. As Winterowd says, institutions must determine their own criteria for defining the "relatively high degree of ability" of the transferable skills. We have recently seen, in an article by Joseph Williams, that the attempts to describe "syntactic fluency," a transferable skill, by means of such quantifiable criteria as "syntactic complexity," are wholly unsatisfactory. We should beware of any effort to "teach" with a direct set of drills any transferable skills even though we acknowledge that drills may work for local skills; thus sentence combining exercises may teach the local skill of syntactic complexity but may not necessarily help the student acquire the transferable skill of syntactic fluency. The reason we can differentiate between syntactic complexity and syntactic fluency is that we who teach advanced composition recognize the difference between the form of an utterance and its semantic intention. But even as we make this recognition, which is clear enough, we know that recognizing semantic intention is an act of interpretation involving critical thinking, which is, in other words, a subjective act. Ultimately all such judgments of transferable skills are subjective, but of course they are subjective according to professional standards which derive from the shared assumptions of instructors. As we share our assumptions with each other in our institutions,

we develop our own standards of performance in advanced composition with regard to transferable skills.

Now that I have tried to define "advanced," and briefly so, let me turn to that other word, "composition." A colleague once asked me why we do not call our journal the Journal of Advanced Writing instead of the Journal of Advanced Composition. The question puzzled me until I was able to make a distinction between product and process. I do now think that we might want a Journal of Advanced Writing in which to parade the products of our students; it might be useful for us to all read and judge how the best writing of students across the country does succeed. But the Journal of Advanced Composition is focused on the process of writing, not the product. More specifically, it is focused on the stages of the writing process as they are generally formulated in the professional literature in the field of rhetoric and composition: prewriting, writing, reformulation. These stages in the writing process involve skills that are acquired, as Winterowd points out, in a number of experiences: through models (hence the importance of the proper kinds of reading); through making attempts at writing; through teacher intervention in the writing process; and through massive, intelligent feedback. But composition is a discipline that encompasses more than pedagogy alone; it must be more than that if it is to achieve its true professional status as a humanistic and scholarly discipline. We need theory which explains, informs, and synthesizes our pedagogy, and we need research which tests our hypotheses about theory and pedagogy. So, advanced "composition" is really quite different from advanced "writing" because composition relies on a self-critical, systematic, and disciplined study of the process by which advanced writing is produced. It will not be necessarily true that an advanced writer is automatically qualified to teach advanced composition; professional training distinguishes the two. Yet I would suggest we define the

practitioner of advanced composition as an instructor or a teacher of writing who is already adept in the actual practice of advanced writing. In other words, before you can teach advanced composition, you must be an advanced writer yourself.

Let me step back, now, and take stock of my tentative definition of the formidable term, "advanced composition." I have offered as a tentative definition the idea that the field is focused on transferable rather than on those local writing skills we associate with editing and mechanics. Furthermore, a student in advanced composition will have achieved a relatively high degree of ability in the transferable skills. Such a student would be introduced to a pedagogy which focuses on the stages in the writing process with which we are all familiar--prewriting, writing, reformulation. The student's instructor would be an accomplished advanced writer who is a professionally qualified scholar in the field of rhetoric and composition, whose particular and highly developed expertise is in "advanced composition." Remember we are talking about a new kind of expertise developed by a single journal which has appeared only twice, with the third issue now in press, and by only one or two genuine advanced textbooks to its credit. The instructor's standards for judging his students' advanced writing would be developed at the institution--the instructor would have to take into account the general assessment of ability among the students of the institution as well as the institution's historically developed sense of its own general "standards." Is the place known for being tough, easy, or moderate? If you will accept this as a tentative definition, and I hope you will be so generous for the moment, I can proceed to build a rickety superstructure on this shaky foundation.

Let me offer a theory about advanced composition which I cannot possibly test here, but which might interest you anyhow. I propose that advanced

composition is a field upon which we can place a unified focus because many different sorts of "advanced" courses are included in my tentative definition and may share common assumptions and goals. I would include among the advanced courses not only the expository writing course next beyond the universal freshman course (this course is commonly called "advanced composition" but it is known widely by a variety of other names as well). I would include professional writing, technical writing, the teaching of creative writing, and writing across the curriculum. I hypothesize that all of these courses can fit comfortably under the umbrella of my definition of advanced composition set forth above. I don't think I will have to argue the point. But I do have to take into account the apparent differences among them.

I submit that the differences can be explained as differences among "advanced" local skills which are at once more complicated and more subtle than the editing and mechanics which are the local skills of the freshman composition course. For example, there are specific local skills which you can learn--you don't have to acquire them over a long period of time--about such writing projects as the research paper, the social sciences paper, the business letter, the report, the proposal, and--here I may be treading on dangerous ground--poetry, drama, and fiction. Perhaps my most difficult case to prove is that of poetry, but I allow that I am defining poetry in a very traditional sense of how the craft is practiced by the imitation of various forms--the sonnet, the couplet, and other stanzaic forms--and by use of various themes and genres--pastoral, satire, love complaint, epic, mock epic, and so forth. I see that one might argue that free verse is precisely defined as a freedom from local skills requirements (free verse is something of a contradiction in terms and probably just as difficult to define as "advanced composition"). I select poetry because it illustrates my case most clearly. You know that you can teach

the "local skills" of the sonnet: it has fourteen lines of ten syllables in an iambic beat, and the stanzaic patterns are set with limited choice among a few variations. Even for the student who has never seen a sonnet before, a couple of days' practice will produce writing that is a sonnet within the narrow definition provided by the local skills involved. But how far the student must develop the transferable skills to write an excellent sonnet will also become agonizingly clear in most cases: you will see the need for syntactic fluency, control of diction, sense of audience, organizational ability, and persuasiveness. I now hazard a guess as to why the teaching of free verse is so popular in creative writing. I guess that creative writing classes, which are usually an elective, would not be very popular if the teacher were to make the students so very aware of how demanding creative writing must be in the area of transferable skills.

The relationship between advanced local skills, which can be learned in a relatively short time, and advanced transferable skills, which have been developing slowly over a longer time, can now come into sharper focus. What is true of poetry is also true of technical writing; one can learn the local skills rapidly, but it takes time and practice to adjust and tune and improve transferable skills so that they mesh with the newly learned local skills. I hazard the guess that the general improvement of transferable skills will be found in the writing student who attempts as many types of advanced writing as the advanced composition program allows. Each time a student learns the local skills relevant to creative writing, or technical writing, or professional writing, or writing the academic research paper, that student will have to adjust, tune, and improve the transferable skills in another important and different direction.

Now that I have made this breathless tour of the advanced composition field,

it remains for me to say how we might go about giving the field a better and more satisfying definition. I should try to provide some directions for new theory, research, and pedagogy which I would base on the paradigm I have outlined here. First, we should begin to concentrate on effective ways of teaching the local skills of the various parts of the field. Every art needs to continuously invent new devices, drills, and techniques for teaching the local skills. I think this is a good place to start because it is practical, and because it will help us to define sharply and exactly what those local skills must be for each kind of advanced composition. The next step would be to discover workshop exercises that successfully integrate local and transferable skills. I believe that such workshop activity will always give rise to speculation about theory and suggest research that may clarify the relationship between theory and pedagogy. I would guess that we will always be very interested in theories of creativity, which within my paradigm would be defined the successful integration of local and transferable skills. I would think we would always be interested in rhetoric, or the theory of audience, to explain local and transferable skills. I think that rhetoric and creativity are broad enough to reach out across the entire field of advanced composition, and it is just these kinds of theory that we need.

What little professional and scholarly literature we have in advanced composition now suggests that, in the writing process, it is reformulation that most interests advanced composition instructors. Currently our thinking is that revision is the name of the game; the student writes a good first draft but needs to revise and revise in order to turn that draft into a piece of writing worthy of the august name of "advanced" writing. That is the state of the art, right now, in a nutshell. And as we all know, revision is accomplished most often through teacher intervention and by massive intelligent feedback.

This means a low student-teacher ratio, facilities for conferences and tutorial sessions, and a student who is ready and willing to engage in self-criticism. In other words, the teaching of advanced composition is a "labor-intensive" activity where the customers must be highly motivated. This would lead me to believe that advanced composition is for an elite of specially talented and highly motivated students who will be given expensive and elegant instruction. That is why I am very interested to learn more about programs of advanced composition for upper-classmen which are a requirement for graduation. For the same reason I am very interested in learning how writing across the curriculum works. In both cases, I guess that the institutions that are truly committed to such programs will have to be willing to spend a great deal of money on them because such instruction is labor intensive. I also wonder if the standards of such programs will be fairly moderate.